



Catholic sisters are among the first group of pilgrims by foot from Kenya destined for Namugongo Catholic Shrine in Kampala, ahead of Uganda's Martyrs Day celebrations on June 3. (GSR photo/John Mondoh)



by Doreen Ajiambo

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KAMPALA, Uganda — May 31, 2024

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Hundreds of religious sisters in Uganda and across other African countries are among hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims on their journey of faith to the [Uganda Martyrs Shrine of Namugongo](#) in Kampala, the country's capital, ahead of Uganda's Martyrs Day celebrations on June 3.

Millions of pilgrims from around the world flock to the shrine every year on June 3 to honor the 22 Catholic and 23 Anglican martyrs killed on the orders of Kabaka Mwanga II, then King of [Buganda Kingdom](#), between 1885 and 1887. Mwanga II, who wanted to wipe Christianity out of Buganda, murdered these Christians because they refused to renounce their faith.

The Catholic sisters and other pilgrims are making stopovers along their journey at various parishes for devotions, rest and exercise sessions. The sisters are using the event to pray for themselves, their families, friends and even for their countries.

While on a pilgrimage and at the shrine, Christians seek divine healing through prayers, holy water and soil. The water comes from the Mukajanga well in Namugongo — named after the chief executioner — and is believed to be holy. On June 6, 1920, the 22 Catholic martyrs were beatified by Pope Benedict XV and later canonized by Pope Paul VI on Oct. 18, 1964. They are regarded as saints.

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The sisters said Namugongo Shrine, which was built in commemoration of those who sacrificed their lives for the sake of the Christian faith in Uganda, enables them to pay respects to the martyrs and renew their faith in Christ, believing that all their prayers will be answered and their lives will never be the same.

[Sr. Alice Jurugo Drajea](#), superior general of the [Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus](#) in Juba, South Sudan, said she has been on a spiritual journey from Juba, the country's capital, to Namugongo Shrine, bringing with her various prayer intentions, among them, peace for her country and God's intervention in her personal life as well as her congregation's.

In December 2013, South Sudan descended into a bloody civil war when President Salva Kiir accused then-vice president Riek Machar and his allies of trying to topple his government. Kiir sacked Machar, resulting in ethnic violence between soldiers

from the Dinka ethnic group aligned with Kiir and those from the Nuer ethnic group allied with Machar.

The conflict has killed around [400,000 people](#) and displaced over [4 million](#) from their homes. Although the two leaders signed a 2018 peace agreement to end the war, there's still heavy fighting and kidnapping across the country of more than 12.7 million people.

"I am taking this long journey so that the martyrs can intercede on behalf of my country for us to have peace," said Drajea, noting that they were using the bus from Sudan to take them near Namugongo before they could start trekking to the shrine. "It is a long and risky journey, given that most of the parts the bus passes, especially here in South Sudan, are very unsafe."



A priest holds prayers for Catholic pilgrims led by religious sisters while on their way from Kenya to Namugongo Catholic Shrine in Kampala, ahead of Uganda's Martyrs Day celebrations on June 3. (GSR photo/John Mondoh)

However, Drajea said she was determined to reach Namugongo and offer more prayers for peace after Pope Francis' visit to South Sudan in early February 2023 failed to convince the two leaders and others to end the war completely.

"Many people have died and [been] displaced," she lamented. "The world leaders have tried to intervene, and nothing has changed. We have been praying, too, but prayers are never enough. So, I will make all the prayers we can get for my country to have peace."

"As a religious sister, I depend on God and the saints to help us," she continued. "And that is why I believe that if I make it to Namugongo safe and alive, the sacred martyrs can help intercede for my country and also for all the people in the world who are suffering as a result of war."

Sr. Jackline Auma of the [Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu](#) said she has been trekking for the last week from northern Uganda, around 200 miles, to Namugongo to thank God for making her a religious sister and ask the saints to intercede in other people's tribulations.

Auma told Global Sisters Report that she wanted to pursue her dream course of becoming a midwife, but she didn't have money to pay for her fees. She noted that she has been praying for God to open the door for any well-wisher to help her achieve her dream.



Uganda Martyrs Catholic Shrine Basilica, Namugongo in Kampala, Uganda's capital. (GSR photo/Gerald Matembu)

Sr. Estery Chinyani of the [Little Children of the Blessed Lady](#) from Zimbabwe said she was traveling to Namugongo by bus, 1800 miles from Harare, the country's capital, to pray for her inner healing of memories.

"I want God to heal my heart from past injustices that I have gone through that I can't discuss with anyone," she said.

Chinyani added, "I have been praying for a very long time and never got the peace I needed, so I need to change the direction of my prayers and add sacrifice to them."

"For example, going to Namugongo by bus from Zimbabwe is my sacrifice because it will require perseverance given my age," said the 57-year-old nun. "I know such a long journey like this one will have some health effects, but I am going there to beg the martyrs to intercede on my behalf."

Meanwhile, Sr. Sarah Rejis of the [Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph-Asumbi](#) from Kenya is leading hundreds of Catholics on a 240-mile walk of faith from Kericho, a town in the highlands west of the Kenyan Rift Valley, to Namugongo.

Rejis said the pilgrims would spend 14 days on a prayerful and meditative journey. She noted that her mission was to pray for the world and humanity.

"I am praying for peace in every country and people with empathy who can love and care for others in times of difficulties," she said.